

THE SKEPTIC

Vol 45, No2. June/July 2025



History



THE SKEPTIC

Volume 45 • No 2. June 25

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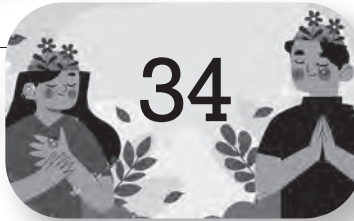
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Tim Mendham looks at the past of this magazine and what the future holds for skeptical information sharing

Times Change

Think back to a time of horrible deprivation, when the population suffered from a serious problem of communicating with each other, when information was in short supply and was only available after much effort, and even then the search often proved fruitless.

Yes, we're talking about the late 1970s, before social media, before the internet, even before mobile phones. A time when telephones had dials instead of buttons, when encyclopedias were paper-based, and when young people read something they could hold in their hands that didn't make noises.

This sad situation was particularly painful for any Australian of a skeptical bent. Unless, for some unknown reason, you had heard of *The Skeptical Inquirer* (launched in the US in the mid-70s under the unappealing name of *The Zetetic*) or happened to own a dusty old copy of Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (1957), you were bereft of food for your skeptical mind.

“ Mark Plummer was known to ring you at all odd hours without regard to time zones. ”

But then came 1980.

Australian entrepreneur Dick Smith invited American conjurer James Randi to Australia to conduct some tests of water divining. Randi was co-founder of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, the publishers of *Skeptical Inquirer*. Smith was a subscriber. Randi was well-known as a debunker of Uri Geller's spoon-bending tricks, along with a lot of other woo-ish claims.

After the tests were completed – and you can see Richard Saunders' excellent restoration of the film made of the event at tinyurl.com/RandiAustralia and read the story of the restoration in the article in this issue –

Dick suggested that someone should set up an organisation in Australia to handle such things. And lo and behold several people put their hands up to take on this important task.

The Victorians obviously got over the line first, not least thanks to the enthusiastic and slightly-concerning liveliness of the fire-brand known as Mark Plummer, a solicitor in Melbourne who became president of the new Australian Skeptics. Dick was patron of the organisation, and continues to be so, 45 years later.

(It should be noted here that some have suggested Mark actually approached *Skeptical Inquirer* in 1979 to volunteer to open a group in Australia, thus preceding the water divining tests. A moot point for later researchers.)

MODEST BEGINNINGS

Actually, nothing was modest about Mark Plummer. He was known to ring you at all odd hours of the day or night, without regard for time zones, suggesting the next great project, and if you were physically near him, you might risk being knocked over by his wild gesticulations. (Sadly, this was a harbinger of things to come, as many years later he suffered from Parkinson's

Times Change

Continued...

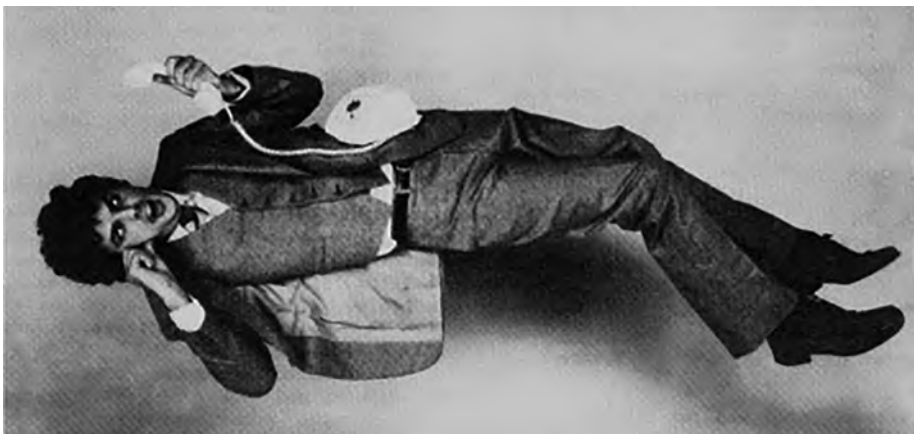
(perhaps to the dismay of current-day collectors, who know that hard copies of the first issue are exceedingly rare these days) bulk copies of issue #1 could be purchased for \$5 for one hundred copies, including postage!

LATER ISSUES, PAGES AND PEOPLE

Issue number 2 moved down to a more manageable A4 size with 16 pages. The font was a typical typewriter style, though it must have used a more advanced machine – an IBM Selectric? – as it was justified text (full-column width). The typesetting was likely pasted into place manually (old hands will fondly remember the glue paste Gumbo, which definitely made your hands feel old).

The lead stories were on transcendental meditation practitioners who could levitate (they couldn't) and an opinion piece on science teaching (it wasn't working). The rest was made up of shorter items covering a wide range of topics.

Issue number 3 – there were only three in that first year – was the first in which Mark was credited as editor. He was subsequently uncredited in the sixth and seventh issues (Volume 2 Nos 3 and 4) and back again in vol 3 no 1. Likewise for typesetting by James Gerrand.



the Skeptic

Volume 7, No 1 (Autumn 1987) Registered by Australia Post - Publications No N688121 Category B

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The Brock Energy Polariser - scientific breakthrough ... or witchcraft?

Readers will be familiar with recent media coverage regarding a controversial dispute between General Motors - Holden and Mr Peter Brock's company, PGT Pty Ltd. Central to this dispute appears to be the so-called "Energy Polariser", a device which operates on magnets and crystals, which is fitted to GM's Commodore vehicles which, after certain modifications, are said to special vehicles.

Australian Skeptics has no interest in the commercial dispute in the mechanical modifications. Our concern is purely with claims made for the "energy polariser", as published in the media. In this endeavour, we are frustrated by Mr Brock's public statements that some claims were made as "a smokescreen" after his premises had been "burgled". He was not explicit as to which claims were genuine and which were "smokescreens".

He requested and we supported Mr Brock to explain whether the following claims are valid:

1. Does the device utilize "organic" energy?
2. Does the device utilize "energy" which cannot be tested by normal scientific means?
3. Does the device "re-align" the molecules in the vehicle?
4. Does the design of the device, resemble any other mechanical adjustment, "turn a dog's car into a snail moving snail"?

If none of the above claims are valid, what claims are made for the "energy polariser"?

Australian Skeptics has made the investigation of the "energy polariser" and various other magical/psychic devices known to be on sale a major project for 1987. Readers who have information or have first-hand experience with such devices, who claim to have benefited either on motor vehicles, water supplies, human beings or anything else, are invited to send us their details. Readers will find such articles or developments in future editions of "the Skeptic".

3rd SKEPTICS CONVENTION

- PAGE 13

the Skeptic

Volume 8, No 1 (Autumn 1988) Registered by Australia Post - Publications No 1281 8 (C)

behind the headlines



THE CARLOS HOAX THE NULLARBOR UFO POLICE USE OF PSYCHICS

Size of the issues was also variable - Vol 2 No 4 was 20 pages; Vol 3 No 3 16 pages; Vol 3 No 4 24 pages; and Vol 4 No 2 was 28 pages. At this latter stage subscriptions for the now-firmly quarterly publication were \$8 a year.

(So that you can keep track of which year an issue appears, it's a handy aspect of volume numbers for *The Skeptic* that they align with the year number, so volume 1 is 1981, volume 2 is 1982, volume 45 is 2025.)

From Vol 3 No 2, science student Janet de Silva was editor. She went

“ Barry Williams became editor as stand-in for one issue only, and remained in that position for the next 18 years. ”

on to be a journalist with the Fairfax group. Vol 5, No 1 was a massive 36 pages. With Vol 5 No 4, Anne Tuohy, a pharmacist, became editor. It might have been Vol 5 No 3, but the crediting of editorial crew was still a bit hit and miss. It also might have been with psychologist Patricia Brown, although she isn't credited on the issue. Another mystery for

the researchers. During 1985, the NSW Skeptics held the first National Convention. It was a huge success – so big, that Mark Plummer left the country. (Just joking.) Mark was invited to take up a leading position with CSICOP, which left a noticeable gap in the Skeptical structure in Australia. The following year, the notional 'head office' – even though there isn't any such thing, at least formally - moved to Sydney. The magazine following in late 1986.

Thus, with issue Vol 6: No 4, yours truly, Tim Mendham, took over the editor's mantle, and thanks to an early crowd-funding call, the Skeptics entered the world of desktop



the Skeptic

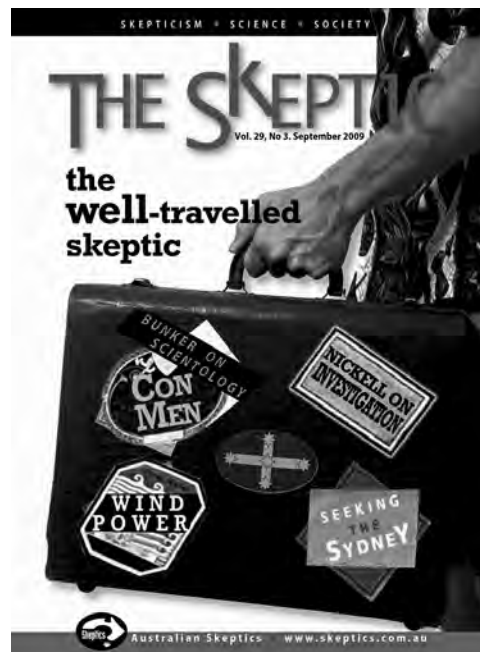
Volume 11, No 4 (Autumn 1991)

Registered by Australia Post - Publication No. 160318/22

moon issue



LUNACY
CONSPIRACY
BUREAUCRACY
(AND OTHER INSANITY)



publishing with a newly purchased Mac computer and PageMaker for production. Old hands with fond memories of Mac Pluses who moved up from Gumbo might remember the little bomb symbol that used to pop up far too readily to indicate that the computer had got bored and decided to crash, thus forcing the tyro desktop publisher to start again. At least the computer only required kilobytes for programs and storage, both on floppy disks.

The magazine at this stage was printed based on Z-fold dot-matrix printouts taken to a very accommodating printer, who remained a key supplier for *The Skeptic* for the next 35 years.

A major upgrade was made to the appearance of the magazine with Vol 8 No 1, when it went colour! Actually, to be honest, it was just the cover in colour and that was because it was printed on coloured paper. But it was a start.

I continued as editor until Vol 10 No 1, when pressures of work and real life forced me to relinquish the post. Barry Williams, at that stage president of Australian Skeptics, became editor as stand-in "for one issue only" and he remained in that position for the next 18 years until he retired as executive officer and editor at the end of 2008 with issue Vol 28 No 4.

Barry's first executive decision was to do away with the coloured paper

cover and use actual coloured ink – what's called 2-colour printing, ie black and a colour of choice, the first of this new style featuring a fairly anaemic orange. His later major executive decision of this nature was when he standardised on an acid yellow second colour from Vol 16 No 3.

Simultaneously, he also changed the masthead. No longer the "similar-to-Skeptical-Inquirer" font, he plumped for a typeface that can only be described as "thin".

Barry's design skills and choices were never cutting edge; he admitted as much, but he made do.

He did, however, increase the number of pages in the magazine to



Left to right:
Editors in line
- Mark "The
Levigator"
Plummer, Barry
"No More Mr
Nice Guy"
Williams, and
Tim "We Must
Look Into This"
Mendham.

Times Change

Continued...

a fairly regular 60+ pages, where it has stayed ever since, thus setting for himself and later editors the task of having to fill that many pages.

Karen Stollznow edited issue Vol 29 No 1 and Steve Roberts (helped by others) edited issue Vol 29 No 2 before Tim Mendham (yes, the same Tim Mendham from the 1980s) was appointed editor again in June 2009. And with that last editorial change, for the first time *The Skeptic* actually had a professional graphic designer, with 4-colour covers and a lot more pics.

CONTENT AND CAMPAIGNS

Enough with volume numbers, editors, and covers.

The most important aspect of *The Skeptic*, as for every skeptical publication, has always been what's inside.

As a quarterly magazine, it is not easy to gazump more frequent press on a juicy story. Fortunately, as a skeptical magazine, there's a lot of topics the other press aren't interested to cover.

For instance, *The Skeptic* had an early piece about the mining company Zanex, which gave Uri Geller US\$250,000 to "map read" the location of gold deposits in the Solomon Islands. Only one party made any money out of this project.

Other campaigns covered in the magazine included various psychic 'stings' (such as Rob Steiner and James Randi/Carlos), countering creationism taught in Queensland science classes, psychic surgeons, the psychic and astrology prediction 'industries', universities teaching woo in science and medical departments, health funds supporting discredited or unfounded alt med practices, just to name a few. Some were small individual campaign, others grander efforts, such as the Great Australian Psychic Prediction Project carried out by Richard

Saunders in association with others.

Many of these were announced and described in *The Skeptic*. Some were taken up by other media, but others, sadly, were ignored. This is not uncommon, so it was reassuring that scams and rip-offs such as these at least got a run somewhere, even if it was in a lowly skeptical magazine.

There is hardly a paranormal or pseudoscientific topic or claim that has not been covered in the magazine. Which is why, combined with the campaigns above, the magazine is (and will continue to be) such a great resource for anyone seeking out information on a claim or individual.

It is extra beneficial that all of the back issues of the magazine are readily accessible and searchable on the Skeptics website, www.skeptics.com.au. The four most recent issues are excluded from that offer, offering exclusivity for subscribers, but even those will be available soon.

Not all of this content was made up of original pieces. The magazine has

always regularly reprinted articles and news items from other publications ... literally, in some cases. In the early days a copy-and-paste approach was evident in the sometimes-dramatic changes in the layout and type font of reproduced copy. (One of these was an article on astrology from a publication this writer edited throughout the 1980s.) In other cases, we have republished items of interest to a general or specific Australian audience from a wide variety of sources – other skeptical magazines, learned journals, university releases, etc.

In some cases, coverage in the magazine lead to further developments outside of its pages. One example was the 1985 publication *Creationism – an Australian Perspective*. This book went through several reprints and had a major contribution to the demise of teaching creationism in schools. You can download a copy of the fourth revised edition, which came out in 2001, from tinyurl.com/Creationismbook.

The magazine also worked in the

THE OFF CUTS

Over the years, various books have been published by Australian Skeptics.

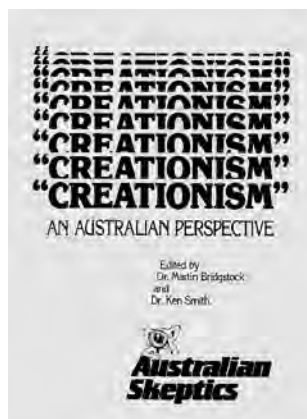
In 1986 the Vic Skeptics organised the publication of *Creationism: An Australian Perspective*. This was edited by Queenslanders Martin Bridgstock and Ken Smith (who were given Life Memberships for their efforts) and featured a series of articles refuting key creationist claims. It was written in response to moves in Queensland to teach young earth creationism in high school science classes. It proved very popular and went through four editions and is still available online.

In response to interest in Uri Geller's

spoon-bending skills, ASI republished a limited edition of magician Ben Harris's *Gellerism Revealed*, originally published in 1985. This proved controversial with magicians who weren't keen on revealing tricks of the trade.

In 1989, Canberra Skeptics produced a small book titled *Skeptical*, which gave short 1-2 page commentaries on various pseudoscientific and paranormal claims.

Two compendiums of collections of articles and news items from the first ten years were published, *In The Beginning* covering 1981-1985, and *Second Coming* covering 1986-2000. These were followed by CD-ROMs of the magazine.





other way, promoting and elaborating on activities by various special sub-committees within the Australian Skeptics group. These include: women and the paranormal; events (conventions, skeptics in the pub, special functions); awards (Bent Spoon, merit awards); \$100,000 challenges; and various specific investigations.

COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

In the early days, the only communications for most Skeptics in Australia were the magazine and occasional dinner meetings and even fewer conventions. The mass media rarely covered the Skeptical viewpoint, and when they did it was often light-hearted ribbing of these wowers and spoil sports. (“Do the Skeptics really believe in themselves” was a common refrain.) Those interested in an alternative to the plethora of woo in the media had a hard job finding some fellow non-believers. There wasn’t even a place where they could “do your own research”.

At least for the first half of its existence, *The Skeptic* was in many cases the sole local means of giving interested parties any sort of in-depth coverage of the skeptical view, in the face of much credulous coverage of woo claims by the media – press, radio, and TV.

The ubiquitous Skeptics in the Pub events, a key communication feature of skeptical groups around the world, didn’t start until the 2000s, with the first generally agreed to have been started in London in 1999 by Dr Scott Campbell, an associate professor and reader in philosophy at the University of Nottingham and who was on the committee of Australian Skeptics in Sydney during the mid-90s.

Thus, the magazine served a vital role in bringing people together and keeping them informed of the latest (and some historical) critiques of the paranormal and pseudoscience, what skeptics groups in other parts of the world were doing, and general discussion of the role and nature of

skepticism in modern society.

In parallel to this, Skeptics across the nation made special efforts to approach the media to try to get them to take the subject seriously. Gradually this worked – the tone of their coverage changed, especially in medical fields, where what were initially seen as eccentric quacks were relabelled as dangerous exponents of misinformation and maltreatment.

The magazine featured hundreds of contributors, some writing original encyclopaedic dissertations on particular topics, some such as Harry Edwards and Richard Saunders with numerous contributions, some writing opinion pieces (often in response to earlier discussions) and some just contributing the occasional letter to the editor.

But changing times have meant changes to editorial content, and to the very existence of the publication.

The number of authors and letter writers (and letters) declined over the years as those prolific correspondents themselves declined – age being a major contributing factor. Modern and younger audiences are not as disposed to put down in writing their thoughts; the comments sections of websites and various social media are their platforms of choice.

The same applies to subscriptions.

Times are changing for specialist magazines worldwide, with declining readership owing to changes in demographics - traditional readers are getting older and younger potential readers prefer more digital and pithy pursuits. Skeptic magazines around the world are not immune to these changes. (Science magazines are in the same boat – see the “Them” column in this issue.)

For some years *The Skeptic* magazine in Australia has seen a decrease in subscriber numbers that has meant it has been running at a loss. The committee has given serious

consideration to alternatives – not an easy task, especially considering the long heritage of the magazine (the second oldest English language Skeptic magazine in the world).

But it came down to a balance between costs and benefits, and sadly we have decided to discontinue publishing the magazine as a quarterly, subscription-based print publication, which is why this is the last edition of *The Skeptic* magazine in its current form.

But *The Skeptic* is not dead; it will just be different. We are moving to a more content-rich online presence. This will include a major global endeavour that will increase our reach and effectiveness. That format will include original content that might have

run in the magazine, but would now be accessed by anyone, for free. People who want to contribute content to that format are more than welcome to get in touch.

We know that some will be disappointed not to have that printed copy of the magazine in their hands. It has been a part of the global skeptical community for more than 40 years. But as the magazine has changed over the years, with different emphasis, content, and design, so too will the nature of its existence.

As the saying goes, those who ignore history are bound to relive it. This is especially so with claims of pseudoscience and the paranormal. As long as that is the case, the old *Skeptic* magazine will survive, even if only as a resource for future generations.

Long live *The Skeptic*. ■

“There is hardly a paranormal or pseudoscientific topic that has not been covered in the magazine.”

About the author:

Tim Mendham was the editor and executive officer for Australian Skeptics for 16 years (plus a bit in the 1980s).



OUR FIRST BOOK - CREATIONISM

the Skeptic

Dear Tom Gidycz: Page 12

PROF. PAUL KURTZ FOR CONVENTION

the Skeptic

Based on the 1995 Creation Science Seminar in Dallas: Page 3

ZANEX PAYS GELLER OVER \$350,000

the Skeptic

1985 Best Science Award: Page 3

U.S. SKEPTICS TAKE ON FAITH-HEALERS

the Skeptic

The Debate For Disorder: Page 11

THE GREAT SYDNEY UNIVERSITY CANCER CHASE

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OSCOOP's Conference Report: Page 6

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3rd SKEPTICS CONVENTION

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ESTI SPOON STUFF IN DETAIL: PAGE 4

the Skeptic

convention issue

GAIA THEORY IMMUNISATION ALTERNATIVE HEALTH

the Skeptic

reports and reviews

BY POSERS: CREATIONISM INDIAN SKEPTIC'S VISIT

the Skeptic

stars and superstition

Autobuy Creationism Mass Hysteria

the Skeptic

challenging the mythology

Crop Circles Greenhouse Effect The End of the World

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convention issue

ESP Tests Flood Myths Poll of Science Students

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living in a new age

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views and reviews

UFOs Strange Energies Alternate Medicine

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A journal of fact and opinion

Creationism

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A journal of fact and opinion

Creationism

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Creationism

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A journal of fact and opinion

Creationists on the run?

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A journal of fact and opinion

perception

the skeptic

A journal of fact and opinion

OKAY!

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Creationism

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CONSTITUTION FOR EXOTIC AND CHOCOLATE

Disappearance from the

the skeptic

QUACKERY CALLED TO ACCOUNT!

THE SKEPTIC

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Journal of fact and opinion

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Journal of fact and opinion

Creationism

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Eureka Prize Winners

Skeptics Conventions

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Panther or just a big cat?

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Journal of fact and opinion

Creationism

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PSYCHIC DETECTIVE LESSONS

THE PLACEBO EFFECT EXPLAINED

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LIVING IN A HOT SO SKEPTICAL WORLD

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SKEPTIC

the skeptic

A SKEPTIC READS THE BIBLE

ARE YOU A BELIEVER?

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2008 CONVENTION ISSUE

THE SKEPTIC

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Challenging Beliefs

ASK YOUR PHARMACIST

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BRAINST IS BEST

UNDERCOVER FOR CANCER

the skeptic

AN INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHICITY

DEBUNKING DETOX DIETS

THE SKEPTIC

OUTRAGEOUS WORDS

Brain Burst! Communicating Science

THE SKEPTIC

Pamela Gay on Space & Faith

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Religion versus Real Medicine

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Pseudoscience & the skeptical response

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Scared of Science?

Pharmacy Pseudoscience Placibo Post

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FAKE!

Science Aliens and Phoney Fauna

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Courts, Complaints & Confrontations

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Brain Burst! Communicating Science

Alchemists, Homeopathy Perception & Cowboys

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The Cost of FREE Speech

Spot the Pseudoscience of the Moon Landing

THE SKEPTIC

Helping Kids Think

Diet - Carnivore & Vegan Review/Mahogany Ship

THE SKEPTIC

The Psychic Business

Reporting on Research Charles Fort, DragonCon

THE SKEPTIC

Politicians Science & Pseudoscience

UFO Cult, Ghost Hunters Business, Mis-mano gut-meat

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Twisted Chiro

Historic Regulation & False Claims Wine Cane, Mystics, Atlantis & Dogma Hoax

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SovCits

Who are they? Why are they? Nullabor UFOs Wakefield, COVID Cranks

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It's Magic

Skeptics, Shaman Sleight of Hand Lemuria, Mermen Toxins, Ghost Hunting

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MINDCAP

How the Brain doesn't work? Skeptical Challenges Manifesting, Ketamine

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FOLKLORE

Fun - Pastors - Tales Influencers & Cancer Wellness, Flying Egg

THE SKEPTIC

the well-travelled skeptic

CON MITT

IN THE BEGINNING

THE SECOND COMING

Astrology All the best from the Skeptic 1986 - 1990

Skeptical